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THE HERMENEUTIC CODE IN CLASSICAL  
DETECTIVE FICTION:  
DOYLE, CHESTERTON AND CHRISTIE

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Detective tales, as Tzvetan Todorov has aptly argued, consist of two stories, the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. The first, in Todorov's words, «tells 'what really happened,' whereas the second... explains 'how the reader(or the narrator) has come to know about it'» (160). This hermeneutic dependence of one story upon another explains their simultaneous presence in the narrative. The story of the crime is hidden, incomplete, defective, and it is uncovered, completed, known, by means of the story of the investigation. As Dennis Porter has explained, «In the process of telling one tale, a classic detective story uncovers another. It purports to narrate the course of an investigation, but the 'open' story of the investigation gradually unravels the 'hidden' story of the crime (29)». This hermeneutic pattern has led Robert Champigny to affirm that «a mystery story is a hermeneutic tale» (13), and it defines the genre in its classical form from Poe to the Golden Age of detective fiction in the 1920s and 1930s.

As a consequence of the hermeneutic core of detective stories, these advance in a question-answer process which Frank Kermode has called «hermeneutic activity». Detective narratives start with the posing of a number of questions (who, why, how), and end when answers have been found for them. This hermeneutic activity, however, is more complex than finding answers to a set of questions. It is also enhanced by series of devices that increase interest in the questions in order to challenge thought, and that delay the answers in order to create suspense. These devices constitute the «hermeneutic code», a term first employed by Roland Barthes, who used it to refer to certain elements (events, words, descriptions) that function in all kinds of narratives as implied questions, answers, or obstacles to the question-answer process. Barthes characterized this code as a

series of «dilatatory morphemes», of obstacles that delay the solution to the enigma and keep it open in order to create suspense. My approach to the hermeneutic code differs from his (and from those of other critics such as Porter, who applied Barthes' findings to detective fiction) because it concentrates on the two extremes of the question-answer process, that is, questions and answers, rather than on the obstacles between them. Barthes neglected these «extreme terms» as a source of suspense, perplexity, curiosity, hermeneutic interest. This interest is not only created by delaying the answer, but also by multiplying the questions and the possible answers, or by rendering the questions posed more perplexing and intriguing. The complex effect of detective stories on readers does not only result from suspended revelations, but from what questions are posed, how many, and how unexpected or surprising the answer is. The effect produced by delaying the answer to a very simple question is very different from that produced by delaying the solution to a complex puzzle, or one that has been discussed and solved in various tentative manners, or one whose apparent solution has proved to be misleading and false. The hermeneutic code, as studied in this paper, emphasizes questions and answers rather than delay, and it is made up of a number of conventions, strategies, and procedures used in the presentation of the crime and its investigation in order to challenge the reader's curiosity and thinking, to arouse what one character in Wilkie Collins' masterpiece, *The Moonstone*, called «detective fever». I will examine a few stories by Doyle, Chesterton, and Christie to isolate a few devices of the code and watch them at work.

Of course the most obvious element of the hermeneutic code is the initial question which sets the investigation in motion, the mystery that must be solved. There is also another important procedure which appears in most detective narratives and it is found at its best in the Sherlock Holmes stories of ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, where the most conspicuous hermeneutic device is the *double mystery*. A mystery, a defective story, is presented to Holmes, who immediately completes the story and finds an explanation that must be either validated or modified by the examination of the scene of the crime and the collection of pertinent data. While these operations are taking place, we are, however, kept in sheer ignorance of the nature of Holmes' tentative story and, consequently, of the meaning of the steps he is taking in his investigation. We cannot account for the questions and actions of the detective, which seem to us as intriguing and enigmatic as the original mystery. Watson usually voices our curiosity, as in the following passage of the story «The Red-headed League»:

«Evidently», said I. «Mr. Wilson's assistant counts for a good deal in this mystery of the Red-headed League. I am sure that you inquired your way merely in order that you might see him».  
 «Not him».  
 «What then?»

«The knees of his trousers».  
 «And what did you see?»  
 «What I expected to see».  
 «Why did you beat the pavement?»  
 «My dear Doctor, this is a time for observation, not for talk. We are spies in an enemy's country. We know something of Saxe-Coburg square. Let us now explore the paths which lie behind it». (346)

Holmes' answers, as well as his refusal to answer, create another source of curiosity and hermeneutic activity. The investigation itself thus becomes a mystery, so we have the mystery of the investigation, created by the detective, along with the mystery of the crime, created by the criminal. The hermeneutic interest of the narrative is thus doubled, as is the final explanation: it answers the questions of who committed the crime, how and why; but also those of what the detective knew and how he knew it.

This scheme of the double mystery is observable in most of the Sherlock Holmes stories. In a few, however, the interest of the investigative plot is almost superior to that of the crime plot. This is so because of (1) the number and queerness of Holmes' questions, whose behaviour is especially puzzling, (2) the presence of a character who voices the superior interest of the investigation, and (3) the fact that, as a confirmation of this, the final explanation is more concerned with the strange behaviour of the detective than with the mystery of the crime. In «The Naval Treaty», for example, Holmes' enigmatic behaviour is even more intriguing than the mystery he is investigating, the disappearance of the treaty. In the course of his investigation, carried out in Woking, Holmes sends his client, Phelps, and Watson to London, pretending he is going with them but finally staying in Woking. He also asks Phelps' fiancée to spend the following day in Phelps' room in Woking. Phelps and Watson discuss Holmes' behaviour during their trip, and their progressive absorption by the enigma posed by Holmes is well illustrated by Watson's narrative, which also makes explicit all the questions raised by the detective's investigation:

Indeed, his mood [Phelps'] was infectious, for I lay tossing half the night myself, brooding over this strange problem, and inventing a hundred theories, each of which was more impossible than the last. Why had Holmes remained at Woking? Why had he asked Miss Harrison to stay in the sick-room all day? Why had he been so careful not to inform the people at Briarbrae that he intended to remain near them? I cudgelled my brains until I fell asleep in the endeavour to find some explanation which would cover all these facts. (271)

The following morning, Holmes will explain both mysteries—who stole the treaty and how he found out. In «Silver Blaze», how he found out is so intriguing, and Holmes' cryptic behaviour so irritating, that one of the characters asks him indignantly: «Don't you think that you have kept

up *your mystery* long enough, Mr. Holmes?» (27). The interest of the detective's final explanation lies in *his mystery* rather than in the original mystery. Holmes will explain all the enigmas created by the investigation, thus making sense, not so much of the crime itself, as of its unravelling.

In the detective stories of Father Brown, CHESTERTON is still using the hermeneutic procedures of Doyle, but he will exploit other elements and strategies as well. The double mystery is still a conspicuous feature of stories such as «The Queer Feet» or «The Flying Stars», where we find once again a detective who, through his unaccountable remarks and actions, creates a mystery in addition to the mystery of the crime. Chesterton, however, goes further in this hermeneutic quest for more enigmas, and to the device of the *double mystery* he adds that of the *complex* or *multiple mystery*. This strategy consists in embedding additional mysteries in the main one. Chesterton's mysteries are not single, but made up of lesser mysteries that must be solved before the solution can be found. In «The Secret Garden», for example, the question is who the victim is as much as who the criminal is. The solution of the mystery depends on the former as much as on the latter. In «The Man in the Passage» the question of the identity of the killer is associated with that of the identity of the figure seen in the passageway, a figure that is described by three witnesses in absolutely different terms. When it is made clear that each witness saw his own figure reflected in a mirror, the answer to the first question can be reached, but not before.

The hermeneutic interest of Chesterton's detective tales is enhanced not only by this addition of questions, but also by the addition of answers, of possible stories which explain the mystery in different ways and thus make it more perplexing. In «The Sign of the Broken Sword», three accounts are offered of the same event, the enigmatic hanging of General St. Clare after his defeat in battle. The first interpretation is the official story, which is unsatisfactory. Flambeau, Brown's assistant, suggests an alternative story and he discusses it with Father Brown, who proves it to be also unsatisfactory. Finally, Brown formulates the right story. This juxtaposition of stories or *hermeneutic talking*, the continuous discussion of the story of the crime, in search for the right explanation, magnifies the hermeneutic activity of the tale and focuses the reader's attention on it. When different stories are proposed, the reader, like the detective, is confronted with *conflicting versions of the story*, and the problem becomes not only the completion of the story, but also the elucidation of the right story.

The synthesis of Chesterton's expansion of the hermeneutic code can be found in «The Oracle of the Dog». Here we have the *double mystery*, with all the conventions associated with it: the detective's queer questions, the curiosity of the other characters about his investigation and discoveries, the final explanation of these. There is also the *multiple mystery*: besides the original murder, there is the mystery of the dog's howling at

the time the crime was being committed in a distant place («...for I think what he [the dog] did a darker mystery than the murder», 355), the problem of the disappearance of the dagger («The disappearance of the dagger is almost as crazy as the disappearance of the man», 357), and finally the suicide of one of the characters, Harry Druce. This simultaneous presence of the devices of the *double* and the *multiple mystery* is highlighted by the words one character addresses to Brown: «I sometimes think *you are more of a mystery than any of the mysteries*», he said. «But anyhow, if you don't believe in *the mystery of the dog*, at least you can't get over the *mystery of the man*» (356). The *conflicting versions of the story* are also conspicuous in this narrative. Firstly, Fiennes' superstitious account of the crime is presented, but it is immediately dismissed by the detective. Then the secretary of the victim proposes another theory rejected by Brown, who, of course, will present the correct version at the end.

Chesterton took the detective genre away from the single and unitary question as well as from the single and unitary answer. For him, the more mysteries, and the more tentative stories, the better. This is the direction AGATHA CHRISTIE will follow. Her hermeneutic devices are an intensification of Chesterton's innovations, but an intensification that puts them in the service of *mystification*. Her narratives not only arouse curiosity or interest; they purposefully mislead the reader, encourage assumptions or expectations which are continually challenged or modified by new developments of the story, and are eventually proved false in a dramatic final reversal. However, some of these «strategies of mystification», as John Cawelti has called them (111), are developments of the hermeneutic code employed by Chesterton.

This intensification of Chesterton's devices is perfectly illustrated by Christie's use of the *multiple mystery* device. In Chesterton, the additional mysteries are embedded within the primary mystery; in Christie, they gain independence and importance, and are articulated in a temporal series of mysteries. They are no longer new questions about the same crime, but new crimes altogether. Instead of *one crime* posing *several mysteries*, which must be explained if the case is to be solved, Christie offers *several crimes* which are *one mystery*, since they are separated in time and space but must be related to each other as parts of the same mystery in order to be solved. As a consequence, detection becomes a syntax as well as a semantics of crime. The *complex mystery* has become a *complex of mysteries*. The *multiple mystery* is broken into a *chain of mysteries*.

How this new development turns curiosity into mystification may be observed in Christie's novels *Murder in Three Acts* (1934) and *An Overdose of Death* (1941). The crime story is very similar in both books, which are very representative of Christie's handling of the mystifying possibilities of the *chain of mysteries*. They both offer a series of three murders, taking place in different places and at different times. In both cases the

first murder is dubious, and it is difficult to decide between natural death or suicide, on the one hand, or murder, on the other. The second murder in the chain seems to indicate that the first death was, in fact, a murder, but then the problem is to find a motive (since the first victim was a harmless and innocent person) and to decide how both murders are related. As it turns out at the end of these novels, both difficulties are a problem of hierarchy, of syntax: the key to the story is deciding which death is primary, and which is secondary. It is the motive of the primary murder that matters. In both books, the mystifying element proceeds from the fact that the second murder in time is the primary one, and the first one somehow enables the second and provides a red herring. In this way, the temporal order of the mysteries becomes a device used to mislead the reader by hiding the main mystery, preventing him from, as Poirot says, «looking at the case the right way up» (*An Overdose* 166).

However, this does not exhaust the hermeneutic and mystifying potential of the *chain of mysteries*. The chain also implies a story which is evolving and reshaping itself at the same time that the investigation advances. The mystery is not static and complete, but dynamic, growing and transforming as new developments occur. These developments, instead of illuminating the previous problems, lead to new ones. In Cawelti's words, «we are confronted at each moment with a new twist that at first seems to lead to a more likely possibility of solution but that in fact drives us deeper into mystification» (116). Furthermore, the dynamic quality of the mystery keeps the detective in the dark for a longer time, since he does not have all the data because new data is constantly being produced. This prevents him from articulating a theory which explains the mystery almost from the beginning, as Holmes and Brown did. This complication has two consequences that affect the hermeneutic devices already discussed.

(1) In the first place, the *double mystery* is operative only at the end of the narrative (it is a feature of the last fifty pages in both novels), for the detective can create a mystery with his investigation only if he has an explanation which he is concealing from us. The mystery of the investigation requires an *enlightened detective*, not a *detective in the dark*. He cannot puzzle us if he is puzzled himself. However, his puzzlement increases ours; it makes the mystery look darker.

(2) In the second place, this *detective in the dark* who does not have a story cannot immediately dismiss the stories made up by other people, as Father Brown did. For this reason, there is a proliferation of explanations and theories; there is much *hermeneutic talking*, but without a voice invested with the authority to decide which story is right and which is not, to save the reader the task of analysing the stories proposed in order to discover their flaws. We are caught up in a hermeneutic net of possibilities, with no one to tell us how to get out. In this fashion, the *hermeneutic talking*, the *conflicting versions of the story*, becomes a *hermeneutic wilderness*. Furthermore, the detective without a story may permit someone else's

story to be presented as the right story. How misleading this can be is shown in *Murder in Three Acts* and *An Overdose of Death*, where this story is contrived by the killer to deceive the detective and the reader. The criminal thus replaces the detective as the «hermeneutic conscience» of the book, as the authoritative voice which makes sense of the information, though of course only until the moment when the detective comes up with the right story. In these two novels we can see the continuous discussion of the story by several amateur detectives who offer different explanations; we see how an explanation of the mystery is picked up as the right one, fostered by the criminal, and forced upon the reader, or even, as in *An Overdose of Death*, upon the detective. This device of the *mystifying story*, together with the *chain of mysteries*, are the most characteristic procedures of Christie's hermeneutic code. In both cases, we see how the development of Chesterton's contributions to the code —the *multiple mystery* and the *conflicting stories*— leads towards mystification.

From the preceding arguments it is easy to conclude that the hermeneutic code is an important feature of the generic repertoire of detective fiction, and a very helpful instrument for studying the genre and its development, for showing how an author's contribution to the code is picked up and used by later writers, and how this process progressively enriches the code and transforms genre. The examples of Doyle, Chesterton, and Christie perfectly illustrate these points. In their works, we can see a pattern of increasing complication and refinement of the code —beginning with the accumulation of mysteries, of questions and answers, and culminating in mystification. We can also see in their work a «hermeneutic» tradition that allows us to link the achievements of disparate authors, to assess their originality in its context, and even to differentiate traditions within detective fiction according to different ways of handling the possibilities of the code (classical detective fiction gives prominence to the hermeneutic code and to specific devices, whereas later schools of the genre, for example the hard-boiled detective novel, use them in a different way, favour different devices, or even neglect the code as a whole).

It is also important to note that the hermeneutic code, as Barthes studied it, is a feature of all fiction, since all fiction stimulates curiosity and creates suspense. The primary difference between detective fiction and other narratives is that hermeneutic interest is mainly retrogressive in the former and mainly progressive in the latter —«what happened» as opposed to «what will happen». What we have called «detective fever» in this paper has its analogy in all fiction in what we might call «narrative fever», the desire to learn more about the story which forces every reader to keep on reading. Detective fiction thus highlights the hermeneutic nature of all story-telling. It is the quintessence of narrative, inasmuch as the reader's experience is similar to that of the detective: both learn stories, both pursue information withheld or manipulated by an author-criminal. It makes sense, then, to think of the existence of a universal hermeneutic code, of a

set of devices shared by all fiction, and, even further, to think that the same devices that appear in an explicit and self-conscious way in detective fiction, are at work under different guises in non-detective fiction. In this sense, the strategies of the hermeneutic code discussed above are a metaphor for the strategies used by all narratives to handle information and manipulate readers' expectations. A quick look at non-detective fiction confirms this insight.

The *mystery of the crime* is nothing but questions about certain events which are withheld from the reader, and such questions are raised whenever an author chooses to conceal events from his reader, as Faulkner does in the decisive scene between Temple and Popeye in *Sanctuary*. The *mystery of the investigation, of the detective*, is above all else a mystery about a character whose mind's workings we do not know, and this is achieved by setting the same limits as in detective fiction to point of view: eye-witness narration and objective narration. These limits can make certain characters walking enigmas, as the witness-narrator's vision of John Gatsby in Fitzgerald's novel demonstrates. The different interpretations of a character's personality or behaviour, or the different accounts of the same events from different perspectives (Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, or *Absalom, Absalom!*), are the counterparts of the *hermeneutic talking*. As in detective fiction, the code may be used to mystify or mislead, that is, to make our understanding of the story difficult or intricate. We find problems of syntax similar to those posed by the *chain of mysteries* whenever we cannot decide how certain events fit into the general design, or when events apparently insignificant, secondary, are proved primary by the later development of the story, forcing us to rearrange our interpretation. In general terms, the hermeneutic effects of later events changing our perception of former ones can be compared to those produced by the *dynamic mystery*. The *hermeneutic wilderness* has a very clear correlate in narratives with no trace of authorial voice to mediate and make sense of the information provided by a variety of narrators or perspectives (Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*). This absence of authoritative voice also leaves room for unreliable narrators whose unreliability is discovered too late, and who therefore force upon readers *mystifying stories* similar to those of detective fiction.

The hermeneutic code, in short, is as old as fiction, and detective fiction simply puts it in the foreground. A very old narrative, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is a good case in point. The story starts by posing a few questions—who is the Green Knight? why does he not die when his head is cut off? what is going to happen to Gawain in his future encounter with him?—and these questions are kept unanswered throughout the narrative, as a source of suspense and perplexity for the reader as well as for Gawain, who wonders in his dreams «How destiny should his doom on that day bring him / When at the Green Chapel the great man would meet / and be obliged his blow to abide without debate at all». (60). New ques-

tions are raised as the story advances—for example how his sojourn in the castle and the exchange of winnings with its lord relate to the overall plot, or why the Green Knight fakes his blow twice and finally only scratches Gawain's neck—but the author's adherence to Gawain's point of view keeps all these mysteries open until the end, when the Green Knight himself makes the revelations that the author has concealed. Perhaps the most significant one, since it is central to make sense of the story, is that the Knight is the same person as the lord of the castle, and that the real encounter and trial have already taken place there, in the exchange of winnings with him; the scratch on Gawain's neck is a reminder of his failure in this trial, since he does not keep the word given to the lord for the exchange. Syntax has thus been used as a mystifying device: the sojourn in the castle, which seemed secondary to the main interest, turns out to be primary. The author has encouraged certain assumptions in the reader that subsequently prove to be ill-founded. The conventions of the Arthurian romance and the terms of the challenge made us think that it was Gawain's courage and prowess that were going to be tested, but then a different kind of trial is introduced without letting us know, in which inner qualities (faithfulness, honesty) are tested, and Gawain fails, although his failure passes unnoticed. We realize this only at the end (as Gawain *does*), in the final explanation offered by one the characters, as in every good detective story.

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